The Midnight Oil

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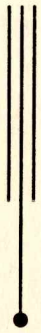

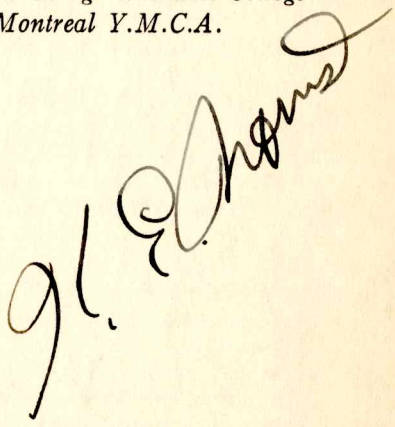

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It is well known to the members of the Rotary Club of Montreal, but perhaps not so well known to guests and to the radio audience, that this Club has a playful custom of requiring each of its members on occasion (one might almost say on demand), to come forward with what it calls a "classification talk"—in other words to speak about his own job, the job which gives him his status or "classification" in the Rotary world.

This is such a talk, and if it happens that I stick closely to my own job, and even to one phase of that, you will understand. It is one of the rules of the game. This is one occasion when a Club member has not only the opportunity but the obligation to talk shop.

My classification in the Montreal Rotary Club is "Education, universities, administration", but I am not going to try to talk about anything so broad as all that. You have recently had talks in this Club on education—and in this city I would not be so presumptuous as to talk about the wide field of university administration.

The institution at which I spend my days, and some of my nights, calls itself (purposely) a "College", and concentrates on the specifically "college" function of undergraduate instruction in Arts, Science and Commerce to the degrees of Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Commerce. Since it does not have graduate faculties or graduate professional schools, the adminstration of these is no part of my job and will not be considered in this classification talk—although such schools are of prime importance to Canada, and are facing great problems at the present time, of which it is hoped the public is not completely unaware.

Instead I have titled my talk: "The Midnight Oil". I thought at first of calling it: "Both Ends of the Candle". Under this title I propose to talk about only one phase of my job, the people who make up the Evening Division of our College and its Schools. I wish I could bring to you, fellow Rotarians, in the brief twenty-five minutes at my disposal, the true story of the hopes and aspirations, the struggles and sacrifices, the perseverance and steady dogged courage of the hundreds of young people of this city for whom I have the honour this day of being the spokesman, for whom the midnight oil is a constant daily ration and for whom both ends of

the candle burn in nightly oblation to the vision which they have set before themselves.

"The heights which great men reached and kept,
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upward, in the night".

It is not just an easy sentimentalism or an overly romantic nature which bring these lines from the poet so often to my mind as I think of the evening students at Sir George Williams College and at hundreds of other evening Colleges throughout the world. They do not think of themselves in these heroic terms at all. They do not expect to become "great men"—but they do want to become "*men*" (and "women"), to fulfill their own destinies, to develop that talent wherewith God has provided them, to grow to the fullness of their own stature, and to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps if no easier method can be found.

"Were toiling upward in the night"—It is the inestimable privilege of my job that I (and my colleagues) have the daily opportunity of working with such people, of helping them to achieve their goals and even of toiling upwards with them in the night. If, therefore, today, I speak somewhat intimately of some of them, perhaps they will pardon the personal reference. Some of them may be listening. They may even be in this room. They may be your sons or daughters, fellow Rotarians, your employees, your colleagues, or your*selves*.

Every one of our 4,600 evening students is a story in himself, a story which I wish I could tell, a story which makes me (and would make you) alternately humble and inspired,—humble that the opportunities we are placing within their grasp are so light and tenuous, and inspired to a new and growing faith in the character and potentiality of our fellow men.

There is a young doctor, whom I will not name, who has just abandoned a lucrative practice in order to seek a post which would give him opportunity for further study and research. Years ago, as a pre-medical student at Sir George, sometimes at night, sometimes in the day division, earning his living in ways which would allow him to finish College, setting up pins in bowling alleys, delivering milk in the mornings (not just in the summer vacation, in order that he might be in good shape for football in the fall, but all winter, every day) and in other ways, all of them hard, one would not have bet a dime on his chances of finishing undergraduate college, let alone medical school. But he did. He had to. There was something inside him which would not let him stop. So he got his M.D., with a scholarship, and after further study and internship he set up in practice and became a "success". Little wonder, therefore, that a few months ago, when he dropped in to see me and reported that he was giving up his nicely established practice, I said, "But, why? Why, after all these years, and getting where you wanted to go? Why?" And he replied: "But we know so little,

and there is so much to know; so much to learn, and so little time to learn it". Then he added this significant remark: "And if one is not clever, it takes that much longer".

"If one is not *clever*, it takes that much longer". He should have said, but he was too modest, or I might have said for him because I knew his story: "If one has to earn a living at the same time, if one has to burn the candle at both ends, it takes *still* that much longer, and is that much harder". Yes, it is the hard way to get an education, but those who do it that way get more than book-learning, and almost of necessity achieve a moral fibre which far transcends the academic value of their education.

The composite institution known as Sir George Williams College and Schools is part of the metropolitan structure and operation of the Young Men's Christian Association in Montreal. Like hundreds of denominational or church-related colleges in Canada and other countries, it derives its philosophical mainsprings and its material support from the parent religious institution. It has grown to its present form and stature from the evening educational classes inaugurated as long ago as 1873 in the Montreal Y.M.C.A., which constituted then one of the pioneer projects in adult education in Canada. This being so, it is but natural that, even today when there is a large day division and a full-time day enrollment which definitely removes it from the ranks of the small colleges in Canada, Sir George Williams College should consider one of its primary functions to be that of providing education in the evening hours for those who have not been able to obtain it before going to work. This explains, also, why, although it has been functioning at the College level for more than 20 years, it still retains and emphasizes its sub-collegiate schools which make it possible for people to finish high school, or even elementary school, or to obtain vocational education, *at night*. It is now almost a common-place for each succeeding graduating class in the College to include within its numbers one or two who have taken their entire high school as well as College education by means of evening study. Last June, for instance, saw the graduation of a man who had started his evening studies in 1931, nineteen years before. Two years at the elementary level, five at the high school level, two in the evening College, then the War, the Navy, a commission, command of a frigate in the Atlantic, and finally in 1949 his degree in Commerce. Nineteen years, including a war in which he had given distinguished service! This is exceptional, of course, but thirteen years is a common record, as in the case of a young man who is now a minister in one of Montreal's churches—thirteen years from Grade 6 to the Bachelor of Arts degree, all by means of evening study, and all while he earned his living by day. "And they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night".

It is with a deep sense of the educational need which it represents that I report to you that, of the 5,800 students enrolled in Sir George Williams College and Schools at the present time, more

than four-fifths are in the Evening Division. Of these, all but a few hundred are following some sort of composite course, toward a certificate, a diploma or a degree. These students are all in personal attendance at classes personally taught, involving from one to three nights of class work per week, not to mention the many extra hours required for home study, library work and written assignments.

Where, you may well ask, do all these evening students come from? What sort of people are they—working people, with jobs and responsibilities, who are not satisfied with casual adult education and who insist on following, year after year, sometimes for 12 or 13 years, a systematic evening educational programme which will give them the equivalent to what they missed while still in day school or college? Are they people who had failed in day school and are now looking for another chance? A few are. Are they people who are not well suited in their jobs, and want training which will enable them to make a change? A few are. A very, *very* small proportion. We must not assume that, because they are people who dropped out of day school or college, they could not have succeeded had they stayed there. A recent survey of education in Canada, mentioned, as a matter of fact, by a speaker during Education Week at this very Club, found evidence to indicate that the majority of those who left school before graduation did so because of "lack of interest". Not because they failed, or were going to fail—some did. Not even because of financial necessity, although *I know* that a great many do. But, the report says, because of "lack of interest". Let us put it more kindly and I think more accurately. They were not convinced of the *relevance* of what they were learning in school or college, to the life they were going to live later. Two years' experience, or ten or twenty, causes many such persons to change their minds—and the Evening Division of Sir George Williams College is full of men and women who have changed their minds, who now believe that education, even in its academic sense, *is* related to life, or can be, and that they are capable of more and require more to achieve what life might have in store for them.

As good an authority as the oft-quoted Harvard Report, published by Harvard University a few years ago, claims that fully 25% of the population are capable (intellectually) of a four-year college education and that another 25% are capable of two years' college—if they want it. In Canada, at the present time, about 3%, if not less, of each succeeding generation, graduates from college. Who are our evening students then? They represent mainly the difference between the 25% who have the ability to go to college, and the 3% who actually do graduate. They are drawn from a great reservoir of 22% of our population who have the capacity for college work but did not, or could not, get it in the ordinary daytime way.

Let me turn, by way of illustration, from College to school for a moment. Do you realize that, in Montreal, in the Protestant Schools, only about 25% of those who enter first year high school eventually graduate with their High School Leaving Diplomas? And do you realize that this represents something less than 17% of those who had started, eleven years previously, in the elementary school? (The figures for the Province as a whole are somewhat smaller). These statistics are not presented in criticism of the school systems. Educational authorities are working at the problem and have made enormous strides in recent years. They are presented rather to show that too many people are *not* being educated, and that there is a potential evening student body much larger *and just as good* as that which now occupies the day schools and colleges in this city.

Evening students, as a matter of fact, are cut from the same cloth as are the Day Division students, and are the same kinds of people. There are those of brilliant academic ability—and those who just get by, or fail. There are ambitious and persevering evening students—and those who would like to take a college education by some painless process of inhalation, if this were possible. There are those with problems involving personal and family adjustments—and those for whom life seems relatively serene and untroubled.

On the whole, however, the evening student has something which he did not have two, or ten, or twenty years before. He is older and more mature. He has returned to his studies of his own volition. He is better motivated. He knows what he wants, and why he wants it. If he does not want it, he does not come. He is spending his own precious leisure, not to mention his money, and usually he has to sacrifice much of his own and his family's social life.

His family, did I say? Hundreds of these students are in the 30's, scores are in the 40's, and many in the 50's and even the 60's. We had a grandmother a couple of years ago, a very young grandmother it is true (for grandmothers are coming younger these days, or so it seems to me) who enrolled in the Evening College the week her new granddaughter was born—because she wanted her granddaughter to be proud of her when she grew up. The year before last a father was graduated from our Evening Division the same week as his son was graduated from another university, and this spring a certain young man will get his degree in engineering at McGill the day before his wife obtains her B.A. from Sir George.

Family life? Sometimes it even invades the classroom—although I am sure it *always* colours the attitudes of the evening students, even when it is not visible to the instructor. Let me illustrate. The week before last, within 24 hours, I visited two classes in the College, a day class and an evening class, as part of a discussion panel on the general objectives of education. These two classes were both in first-year College, and may own speech was the same in both cases. But what a difference in the discussion! In the Day class it followed the anticipated channels, and centered around

the importance of the humanities and the question of "usefulness" in higher education—in the evening, believe it or not, we soon found ourselves discussing modern methods of teaching arithmetic and reading to Grade I children, because several of the students were parents of young children and two members of the class were elementary school teachers in their daytime hours.

Make no mistake about it, such motivation is keen, and makes demands upon the teacher which the teachers themselves find most stimulating, if most exacting. It is a rich experience, for anyone who likes teaching, to instruct an evening class. But Evening College is no place for the teacher who does not know his subject or who is only one lesson ahead of his class in the text-book. Indeed, the evening student, as a rule, is not content with the text-book, but is constantly relating his classroom work to his outside experience, his job, his family, public affairs, or life in general. The reverse is also true; he is constantly testing the academic theory with the criteria of his experience. The evening student may be more of a pragmatist, but, if so, it is in the sense that he wants a theory to be more than mere words—he wants it to work. He does not necessarily insist that it be useful or profitable—but does want it to be realistic.

Mention of the words "useful and profitable" raises another question. It is generally supposed that evening students, especially those working for degrees, are doing so because of ulterior motives, the desire for better jobs, higher earnings, a better living, or perhaps even greater personal prestige. Such a statement is usually intended as a criticism of such motives. My comment would be twofold. *First*, this is not true any more often of evening students than of comparable day students. On the contrary, there are just as many evening students as day students who do have, or develop, motives which extend beyond their jobs to general culture, and who do catch the gleam of learning and scholarship beyond the merely utilitarian. *Second*,—what if they *do* have such ulterior, vocational, motives. Vocational objectives are necessary and valid and laudible, and must be acknowledged by education at all levels. It is true that man cannot live by bread alone—but he must have bread. We must all earn our living, and vocational competence is an essential of good citzenship and adequate personality. Vocational objectives are no more a matter of shame to the accountant, the engineer or the economist, than they are to the classicist, the professor of philosophy or the research physicist.

The real test of a vocational education, the test as to whether it is education or mere training, is not whether it is too vocational but whether it is sufficiently educational—whether it extends beyond the immediate, whether it develops all its possibilities for general education, whether it leads to the growth of a person broader than his vocational skills, a person who sees the social and spiritual implications of what he is doing for a living. The current dilemma which faces higher education, astride this very question,

will never be resolved, in my opinion, until colleges and universities on the one hand broaden the background of their specialists and on the other hand provide relevance to life outside the classroom in all their subjects and curricula, including the most abstract and ethereal. The most vital kind of education can be one polarized around a dominant interest, a focus or centre to which and from which radiate meanings and implications for all of life. This can be done around a vocation as well as it can be done around a science or a language discipline.

But let us return to our evening students, and our talk of the kinds of people they are. What do they do for a living, during the day-time hours? Last year 1,014 of them were general clerical workers, and 788 were in technical work of some kind. There were 199 accountants or bookkeepers, 319 secretaries, 104 salesmen, and the same number of school teachers,—140 draughtsmen, 54 engineers, and 169 lab workers. There were 105 in the so-called professions, and 139 who confessed to unskilled labour. And so on, and on! There were nurses and office boys, managers and ministers, housewives and social workers, waitresses and private secretaries—people. Just people—of all kinds and capacities and ages—but all of them with an idea, an idea that life could hold more for them than it now held, that their "reach might exceed their grasp", but that that would not prevent them from reaching.

Why do they come? They do not all want to become lawyers, or doctors or ministers, or learned college professors. Indeed, there is only a small fraction of them who have any such idea, although many of them do have the doors to these professions opened to them through evening study, (as many of you fellow Rotarians, whom I know personally, had the doors to your present professions or occupations opened to you by means of evening study). But no—for the most part they want to become better people in the work in which they are now engaged, and in the lives on which they are already embarked.

I know a man who is secretary-treasurer of a large firm in this city. He was assistant secretary when he enrolled in the Evening High School—and he was still assistant secretary eleven years later when he was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Commerce. It so happened that he was promoted to the secretaryship the year he graduated—but neither he nor I know whether that had anything to do with it. He was that kind of a person, and would probably have become secretary whether he came to evening college or not. But without a shadow of doubt he will be a better secretary because of it—not just because of what he has learned, although that is important, but because of what he has become while he has been pursuing his evening studies.

On the other hand, there is a chief chemist in the laboratories of one of our large firms, who during the depression of the early thirty's got permission to work as a lab boy in his present firm,

without pay. At the same time he attended evening college, on a bursary provided by the College, taking all the chemistry he could get, along with his general studies. After awhile the firm was able to take him on its payroll, and today, as I said, he is chief chemist. Did his education help? Assuredly—but, perhaps, he also was that kind of a person. The College merely provided the bootstraps which he could use to pull himself up.

It is fair to say that, in strict vocational terms, apart from all the other important products of education, the evening college student has an opportunity, unparallelled except in the interneship of the medical profession, to unite his work with his study, to integrate theory with practice and to apply immediately what he has learned in the classroom. For him his daily work is a laboratory, and the constant demands of office or shop or factory constitute an interneship which daytime educational institutions find it hard to match for realism. Indeed, in some cities where the educative value of such a partnership between work and study is recognized, it is formalized by a system of coordinators— in which the employing firm takes some responsibility for arranging the work-experience of the employee in such a way as to relate, if possible, to the vocational subjects he is studying in evening college; and the college, in turn, allows a flexibility in the choice and timing of vocational subjects to relate most effectively to the student's daytime job.

While no such formal system is in operation at our College, something of this sort does happen informally in many of the 1,600 odd firms from which our students come, and many employers provide financial help to enable and encourage employees to follow systematic evening study. Believe me, in the firms in which this is being done, it is appreciated by the students and is adding immeasurably to employee morale.

During the past five years the colleges and universities in Canada have been enjoying the unique experience of having hundreds of student veterans on their campuses—men and women who have had a few years to ripen, who have had experience which matured them, and who have developed motivations which are clear-cut and definite. In the classroom and on the campus, educationists agree, these veterans have transformed academic life, and it is with a deep sense of the passing of an era that the Canadian universities now see the student-veteran classes passing from the undergraduate colleges. But—the evening college, at Sir George Williams and elsewhere, has always had that kind of students, mature, ambitious, courageous, persevering, conscious of their motives and willing to pay the price in midnight oil for the achievement of their goals.

"And they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward, in the night."